

Darkhouse Spearfishing Enters Third Season

By Ron Wilson

The newness of darkhouse spearfishing – like the paint on a much-used underwater fish decoy – has faded some. The activity, initiated December 1, 2001, is heading into its third winter. It's not new anymore.

Last winter, more than 1,600 people registered – a requirement in North Dakota – to darkhouse spearfish, compared to 1,255 in the inaugural 2001-02 season. Seventy-four percent of the registrants, who responded to a North Dakota Game and Fish Department survey, indicated that they actually ventured onto the ice and tried their luck. And 71 percent of survey respondents indicated they speared on only one lake last winter. North Dakota has 28 waters open to darkhouse spearfishing.

Northern pike and rough fish are the only fair game during the darkhouse spearfishing season. In 2002-03, participants took nearly 5,200 pike through the ice, while less than 2 percent of survey respondents said they speared rough fish.

The average weight of pike harvested was between 6-7 pounds, while 10 of 513 respondents indicated the largest northern they took was 20 pounds or heavier. The largest northern was 25 pounds.

The top five lakes in 2002-03, in terms of pike harvested and spearfishing days, were Grass Lake, West Lake, Lake Sakakawea, Devils Lake and Spiritwood Lake. These five waters accounted for 58 percent of the darkhouse pike harvest.

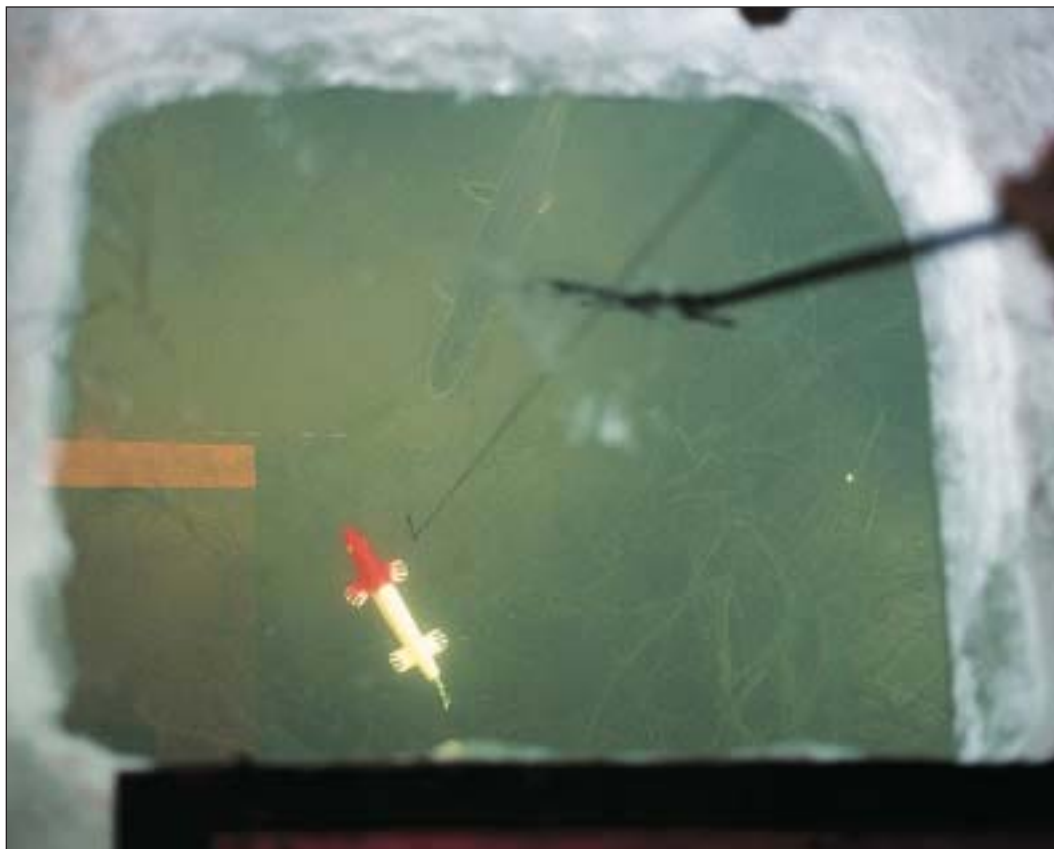
Terry Steinwand, Department fisheries chief, said reviews from the public on darkhouse spearfishing are mostly good. But some people are concerned that spearers are taking all the big pike from those lakes where the activity is allowed.

"Theoretically, darkhouse spearfishing is not impacting the size structure on most lakes," he said. "As we learn more about the impacts on the pike population in a given lake, we will make adjustments if necessary."

Steinwand reminds people interested in darkhouse spearfishing that a valid fishing license is needed to participate. Plus, they must also register with Game and Fish on the Department's website at discovernd.com/gnf or at any Game and Fish office.

"Darkhouse spearfishing provides another opportunity to get outdoors and enjoy North Dakota," he said. "What we are hearing from the people doing it is that they really enjoy it."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota *OUTDOORS*.



Craig Blirle

Darkhouse spearing is allowed only in the following waters: Devils Lake, Benson/Ramsey counties; Silver Lake, Benson County; Powers Lake, Burke County; Rice Lake, Emmons County; Juanita Lake, Foster County; Lake Etta/Alkaline Lake complex, Horsehead Lake and Round Lake, Kidder County; Flood Lake, LaMoure County; Beaver Lake and West Napoleon Lake, Logan County; Buffalo Lodge Lake, McHenry County; Coldwater Lake and Dry/Goose Lake, McIntosh County; Cavanaugh Lake, Morrison Lake and Sweetwater Lake, Ramsey County; Grass Lake, Richland County; Coal Mine Lake, Sheridan County; Mallard Marsh and Spiritwood Lake, Stutsman County; Lake Laretta, Nelson County; Cottonwood Lake, Williams County; Lake Sakakawea from Garrison Dam to Highway 85 bridge at Williston; and Lake Oahe from South Dakota border to MacLean Bottoms boat ramp.